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FREE REMARKS

ON THE

PRESENT SYSTEM

OF

OUR CORN LAWS.

1791



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PRESENT SYSTEM

OF

OUR CORN LAWS,

AND ON THE

NECESSITY OF ALTERING IT.

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F R E E R E M A R K S

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P R E S E N T S Y S T E M

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O U R C O R N L A W S.

IN a country blessed with an excellent climate and rich soil, where property has been perfectly secured for at least a century; a country well acquainted with the mode of husbandry, practiced in a neighbouring kingdom, which has been long celebrated for its knowledge in it; one would naturally expect, that
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agriculture must have made a considerable progress. The fact however was otherwise, until within these very few years, owing to the following causes:—the great poverty of the Irish tenantry; the unjust and impolitic vote of agistment; the severity of the popery laws; and, I am sorry to say, the mistaken policy of a sister-kingdom, from which Ireland got her constitution, and with which she is, and must ever remain united by the closest bonds of mutual interest. A more enlightened policy and a juster estimation of the true interests of both kingdoms having now happily taken place, this last cause, which it must be owned was the principal one, should not have been mentioned, if it had not laid the foundation of great part of our present corn system: I mean the land carriage bounty on corn, ground and unground, brought to Dublin. If it be a reproach to a great nation to have remained for
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a long time under the influence of prejudice, and to have mistaken her real interest, it is no more than what every nation in the world has afforded innumerable instances of, and Ireland perhaps as many as any other.

Though I have not taken notice of tythes, as one of the causes which impeded the progress of agriculture here, it is not that I differ in opinion from the learned Archdeacon Paley, who says, that tythes are a heavy tax on tillage, and operate as a bounty upon pasturage; but because most other countries experienced the inconveniences arising from tythes as well as Ireland. However exceptionable the land carriage bounty must appear at present to every unprejudiced, disinterested person, it was at the time it was adopted, in 1758, probably the best substitute, which human wisdom could have devised for any of the following measures,

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which were then considered as unattainable : an effectual duty on all foreign corn, to secure the home consumption for our own : an operative export bounty, to take off any redundancy : a proper sufficient coast bounty. This every one knows was the *real cause* of adopting the land carriage bounty, and not any peculiarity in the situation of Dublin. It was in fact a scheme, and quite *a new one*, for encouraging tillage in a country, where it had been long so much neglected, as not to raise corn sufficient for her own trifling consumption, and therefore obliged to import foreign grain ; which must be very pernicious to a poor country, that had but one manufacture, and that confined to a very small part of it. I do not mean to put the coast-bounty in competition with either of the other two measures ; it is so much inferior to them, that I have great doubts
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of the propriety of continuing it ; though it is beyond comparifon more eligible than a land-carriage bounty. I fhould be afhamed to make this remark, if I had not heard it fagacioufly obferved, that a carriage by land is more certain than a carriage by fea. The very low price of corn in England for a great length of time, rendered this meafure the more neceffary. During a period of fifteen years, from 1742 to 1756, the average price of wheat in London was not more than twenty-seven fhillings the quarter *. At the end of that period corn got up there to an exorbitant price, and the average price of corn in England for the fifteen fucceeding years was fo very high, that in 1772 the parliament thought it neceffary to make fome alteration in the corn laws. The bill, it is true, did not pafs into a law until

* Anderfon's Hift. of Commerce, vol. iv. page 157.
London edit. 1789.

the following year, owing to an accident. It appears from this, that the high price of corn was prior to this act of 1773, and that the complaints made against this act, of raising the price of corn in England, are not founded.— The good effects of the land-carriage bounty were greatly owing to the high price of corn in England, which, as I said before, began nearly at the time of the commencement of the bounty-act, and has continued to this time, with few intermissions. This has caused England to import corn to a considerable amount for her own consumption; yet her various and extensive manufactures were never in so flourishing a condition as at present, though her manufacturers pay at least one-third more for their bread than they did forty years ago, and though the taxes on what are generally considered there as the necessaries of life, have increased more in England within that period, than

than in any other country in Europe. The two great laws made in England for encouraging tillage; preventing the importation of foreign corn, by laying heavy duties on it; and promoting, by bounties, the exportation of their own; are often confounded by political writers, who attribute solely to the bounties what, in all probability, the high duties greatly contributed to. The high duties on foreign corn took place in England in 1670, eighteen years before the export bounty act, which passed in 1688; yet corn was remarkably low there in the years immediately preceding this last period, which was the cause of passing the bounty act, in order to raise the price of it.—The advocates for the bounty say, that it has had a contrary effect, and that it has lowered the price of it. To prove this they produce the average prices of corn in England, for fifty years before and after passing the act. This,

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however, is not conclusive, if what the author of a French work in great repute asserts be true ; that the average price of grain in France was lower during the latter period, than in the former †, tho' no export bounty took place there. One may, I think, form to himself an idea of a good corn country so circumstanced, as to render an export bounty on corn unnecessary, if not impolitic ; for to a country consuming, in consequence of her opulence, and numerous manufactures, an immense quantity of corn, and still indebted to other countries for the raw materials of some of those manufactures, which she may raise at home, the good effects of an export bounty on corn are very doubtful. Protecting the growth of the country by high duties on foreign corn, seems to be much

† Sur la Legislation & le Commerce des Grains, attributed to Mons. Neckar.

a safer method, as it operates as a bounty on production, without being subject to any of those frauds, to which every other mode of giving bounties on production are liable, and to some of which the bounties on export are, if I mistake not, exposed. It is scarcely possible to suppose a corn country, in which a measure of this kind, under proper restrictions and regulations, must not produce good effects. The corn act, passed this session in England, shews how much more effectual, for the purpose of encouraging tillage, their parliament consider that, than an export bounty.—No man, I believe, ever denied, that the land carriage bounty has been of great service to Ireland, and particularly to ten or twelve counties in it; but it does not follow from thence, that it would be either wise or just to continue it in our present situation, after we have adopted the very measures, for which it was
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only a substitute. It is the remark of one of the first political writers of the age, that laws frequently continue in force long after the circumstances which first gave occasion to them, and which alone could render them reasonable, are no more. The continuance of the land-carriage bounty until now, is a strong instance of it. Ireland has at least eight hundred miles of sea-coast, and contains above eleven millions of acres, of which considerably more than one-fourth part lies within ten miles of this very extensive sea-coast. This is exclusive of the large tracts of excellent tillage ground, which lie contiguous to its navigable rivers; for several such rivers it has, though they have escaped the notice of gentlemen of great sagacity. It is unnecessary to observe, that no country in the world of its size, possesses a greater number of excellent harbours, and safe commodious bays and creeks, from
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whence corn may be taken to any part of the globe. To talk of the necessity of a land-carriage bounty, in an independant kingdom, thus circumstanced, is certainly one of the greatest paradoxes that ever was attempted to be supported in an enlightened age and country; and the arguments made use of for that purpose, are full as extraordinary as the measure itself. I must first remark, that the advocates for the land-carriage bounty artfully endeavour to confound it with every other part of our corn system, as if they must all stand or fall together, and by that means to alarm the great body of the people of Ireland, who are so materially interested in the general agriculture of the kingdom. This scheme however will not answer, as no man of common sense will believe, that the landed interest of Ireland will agree to any alteration in those great measures, which have increased the tillage of Ireland

land within these very few years more rapidly than could be expected. The measure, which has contributed by far the most to this increase, is undoubtedly the corn act of 1784, which laid duties equal to a prohibition, on all foreign corn imported, until our own corn should sell at a very high rate; wheat at thirty shillings the barrel, and other grain in proportion: To prove this it will be only necessary to compare the exports and imports of grain, before and after this act passed. An authentic account lately published of the value of corn, imported into and exported from Ireland, for several years, ending at Lady-day 1790, furnishes me with the means of doing it. By this abstract it appears, that the value of corn, ground and unground, exported in five years, from Lady-day 1780 to Lady-day 1785, amounted to 705,822*l.* 1*1s.* 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ *d.*; and that the value of the corn imported in that period, was

624,940*l.*

624,940*l.* 12*s.* 7*d.*: Balance in favour of export, 80,881*l.* 12*s.* 7*d.*—The value of the grain, ground and unground, exported from Lady day 1785 to Lady-day 1790, is 2,204,162*l.* 18*s.* 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ *d.*; the value of the same articles imported during that time, 37,225*l.* 7*s.* 3*d.*: Balance of export, 2,166,937*l.* 11*s.* 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ *d.* This leaves a balance *in favour of the five last years, during which foreign corn was subject to high duties on importation, of* 2,086,055*l.* 13*s.* 0 $\frac{1}{4}$ *d.* The export-bounty act took place in 1780.—We are told, that the measures I have alluded to, would not have succeeded without the aid of the inland bounty; and the reason is a curious one: because they have not succeeded in England; (for there have been large quantities of foreign corn imported into other ports, as well as London), as if there was not any difference between the circumstances of the two countries; between a country where bread-

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corn is the food of the people, and a country where potatoes are; between a country where, from its immense riches, and extensive manufactures, a very large proportion of the people are enabled to feed on flesh, to procure which a considerable part of the soil is appropriated, and a country where the common people, from their poverty, very seldom taste it. We are told, that the counties in the neighbourhood of the metropolis cannot supply it with corn; because they could not formerly, *when foreign wheat met them at their own market, with a premium of above three shillings a quarter, exclusive of freight.*—It is painful to be obliged to take notice of so absurd a mode of arguing. One of the reasons for continuing the inland bounty is a very strong one against it. Dublin, it is said, requires 300,000 barrels of wheat for its yearly consumption, which, it is computed, will take 12,000 acres; supposing one.

one-half always under fallow. This is at the rate of *five barrels to the acre*; and there is not so much ground, it is pretended, to be spared from pasture, &c. in the neighbouring counties.—Nothing can show more strongly the wretched husbandry of this boasted region of tillage, for which Ireland is taxed above 60,000*l.* a year. In every country the produce of the ground near large cities is known to be much superior to the produce of the ground at any remote distance. If that has been constantly remarked in England, Flanders, and other countries, where their farmers, from various causes, make vastly a greater quantity of excellent manure than the Irish farmers do, how much greater must the difference be here? The question however is not, in what part of Ireland the corn, which is necessary for home consumption, ought to be raised; but whether it be just or politic to apply the public money

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to encourage tillage in those parts of it which are the most remote from the capital, and from water-carriage, and of course where it can be of the least national benefit. The inhabitants of the counties near Dublin, and of those on the sea-coast, may think it a little severe, that their money should be able to deprive them of the natural advantages they had a right to expect from their situation, and which were probably considered at the time of purchasing their ground, or taking a lease of it.—The more populous any city is, the more sensibly a temporary scarcity must be felt in it, and for that reason, and that alone, greater encouragement should be given *at such a time*, to bring the necessaries of life to a capital, than to small towns; but holding out a constant national bounty to farmers and millers, to bring their corn and flour to the capital, preferably to small towns, cannot be defended on
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any principle of good policy, or common sense. Is it not in capitals, that the richest and most opulent part of every nation reside? Is it not in capitals, that tradesmen and manufacturers receive the highest wages for their labour, and for a very good reason; because house-rent and taxes are much higher there than in small towns? Food, in very warm countries, is the only want of life, but in this climate it is far otherwise. The value of the bread consumed by a Dublin tradesman, who earns twelve shillings a week, makes but a very small part of his annual expenditure; for luxury prevails much more amongst that, as well as every other class of people in capitals, than in small towns; and experience shews us, that habitual superfluities become real wants. For which reason, if the inland carriage bounty had the effects, which the advocates for it pretend, *but which I deny*, of reducing the price of corn in

Dublin

Dublin below the average price of the kingdom, it would be unjust and impolitic. In what light then must it be considered, if it has a contrary effect, which I am satisfied is the case. Every person acquainted with the causes which contribute to raise or lower the price of grain, must know that the number of sellers contribute much to it: for example, that five hundred barrels of wheat brought to market, the property of fifty different persons, will sell at a fairer and more equitable price than if they belonged to ten or twenty persons.— Without throwing any imputation on the characters of corn and flour merchants, who certainly are very useful members of society, a large and populous city, which entirely depends on them for their bread, cannot expect to eat it as cheap, as if they dealt with farmers, whose circumstances will not allow them to speculate, and therefore must sell. The flour
merchants,

merchants, who deal on large capitals, and still much greater credit, are under no such necessity, and will supply the market in the manner most likely to turn out to their own advantage. This is so very obvious, that I shall not further insist on it.—It has been long known, that flour would not sell near as well at foreign markets as corn, which seems not to have been sufficiently attended to by those who laid out their money in erecting flour-mills; therefore, if withdrawing the inland bounty should put a stop, as it is said it will, to the building any more mills, instead of being an injury, either to the public or to individuals, it would be rendering both an essential service. To say, that the corn granaries, though in general built in improper situations, will become useless, for want of the inland bounty, is what no one will believe, who will give himself time to reflect, that as the corn-
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merchant's profit increases in proportion to the farmer's indigence, there is probably no country, where the inland corn trade is more profitable, than in Ireland. The Grand Canal is a considerable advantage, which Dublin enjoys over every other city in the kingdom.— The Royal Canal will be another; and it should not be forgotten, that the nation have contributed largely to both. The land-carriage bounty is a measure of a very different nature, and posterity will be at a loss to account for its continuance since the year 1784, when it became totally useless; yet it has cost Ireland since that time between *four and five hundred thousand pounds*; a sum which, if properly applied, might have been the means of establishing different manufactures in various parts of the kingdom, and thereby of finding employment at home for our people, who will otherwise emigrate. 6 DE 58

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